

Bonnie Jo Campbell Biography

Source: bonniejocampbell.com



Bonnie Jo Campbell grew up on a small Michigan farm with her mother and four siblings in a house her grandfather Herlihy built in the shape of an H. She learned to castrate small pigs, milk Jersey cows, and, when she was snowed in with chocolate, butter, and vanilla, to make remarkable chocolate candy. When she left home for the University of Chicago to study philosophy, her mother rented out her room. She has since hitchhiked across the U.S. and Canada, scaled the Swiss alps on her bicycle, and traveled with the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus selling snow cones. As president of Goulash Tours Inc., she has organized and led adventure tours in Russia and the Baltics, and all the way south to Romania and Bulgaria.

Her collection *Women and Other Animals* details the lives of extraordinary females in rural and small town Michigan, and it won the AWP prize for short fiction; her story “The Smallest Man in the World” has been awarded a Pushcart Prize. Her novel *Q Road* investigates the lives of a rural community where development pressures are bringing unwelcome change in the character of the land. Her critically-acclaimed short fiction collection *American Salvage*, which consists of fourteen lush and rowdy stories of folks who are struggling to make sense of the twenty-first century, was a finalist for the 2009 National Book Award in Fiction.

For decades, Campbell has put together a personal newsletter, *The Letter Parade*, and she currently practices Koburyu kobudo weapons training. She earned her M.A. in mathematics and her M.F.A. in writing from Western Michigan University. She now lives with her husband and other animals outside Kalamazoo. She teaches writing in the low residency program at Pacific University.

Book Summary

Source: books.wwnorton.com

Finalist for the 2009 National Book Award in Fiction; finalist for the 2009 National Book Critics Circle Award in Fiction. “These short stories approach their subjects from an array of perspectives, but what they share is freshness, surprise, and a compulsion to plumb some absolute extremes of American existence.”—National Book Award citation

American Salvage is rich with local color and peopled with rural characters who love and hate extravagantly. They know how to fix cars and washing machines, how to shoot and clean game, and how to cook up methamphetamine, but they have not figured out how to prosper in the twenty-first century. Through the complex inner lives of working-class characters, Bonnie Jo Campbell illustrates the desperation of post-industrial America, where wildlife, jobs, and whole ways of life go extinct and the people have no choice but to live off what is left behind.

Discussion Questions

Source: books.wwnorton.com

1. In “World of Gas” and “King Cole’s American Salvage,” we meet our protagonists at work. Work also figures largely in the plot, themes, and character development of “The Inventor,” “The Yard Man,” “The Solutions to Brian’s Problem,” and “Bringing Belle Home.” How are Campbell’s characters defined by their work, on and off the job? Is there more to being a member of the working class than having a certain kind of job? Are working-class characters common in other fiction you’ve read?
2. Many of Campbell’s characters have made a habit of drinking and smoking. Addiction to methamphetamine also affects the characters in many of these stories. What purposes might these characters have for seeking altered states of mind? Compare and contrast the characters who use and abuse drugs and alcohol with those who don’t. What does your comparison suggest about the nature of addiction?

3. Did you find yourself identifying with and/or rooting for any of the romantic relationships described in these stories? Which of the relationships seem to have the best chance for success? Which seem compromised beyond repair? What particular personal and cultural details make fulfilling relationships so difficult for these characters? What universal conclusions, if any, can you draw about intimate relationships from these stories?

4. Guns and the threat of gun violence play a role in the stories “Family Reunion,” “The Burn,” and “Falling.” Campbell once said in interview that whether or not a gun appears, it is safe to say that every household in these stories contains a shotgun, rifle, or handgun. How does the prevalence of and access to firearms affect the lives of these characters? How would the plots of stories like “Family Reunion” and “The Inventor” change if guns were not available to their protagonists?

5. Compare the plot structure and characters in “The Trespasser” to the fairy tale “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” Compare the quality of the girl’s revenge at the end of “Family Reunion” to the grisly revenge we find in many fairy tales.

6. Pain plays an important role in the stories “The Burn,” “The Inventor,” and “Storm Warning.” What purposes might the author have for putting her characters through so much physical distress? What is the effect of such distress on the reader? How is physical pain related to emotional pain in these stories? How does the author use irony or humor to soften her characters’ most physically and emotionally painful experiences? Where does Campbell’s humor come through most effectively?

7. Money is in short supply for the majority of Campbell’s characters, and the need for it is a driving force, especially for the Hunter in “The Inventor,” who considers that at least if he goes to jail, he might get his infected teeth pulled. King Cole, in “King Cole’s American Salvage”, is the only character who has wads of cash, but it does not protect him. In what ways is King Cole in the same boat as Campbell’s other characters? What does money mean for Jill in “Boar Taint”? How is her relationship with money different from that of characters in both “Boar Taint” and other stories?

8. These stories take place in rural communities and small towns. How might the plots of the stories and the lives of the characters change in urban settings?



Book Club in a Bag

American Salvage
by Bonnie Jo Campbell



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American Salvage

Contents and Sign-out Sheet

Kits include one bag, 10 books, and a pocket folder of materials.
Use this sign-out sheet to keep track of who takes which copy of the book. Groups may keep the folder when returning the books and bag.

Copy	Name	Returned
1	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
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9	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
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